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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how selected aspects of contemporary urban environment influence the form and function of the family and the position of women within the family and within society. The study was undertaken within the framework of Marxian analysis and with a specific focus on how advanced industrial capitalism perpetuates the family in its present form. The hypothesis is that the positions of the family and of women have changed fundamentally since the capitalist mode of production brought about a spatial and functional separation between domestic and industrial activities. Specific indications of this separation include that the means of making a livelihood passed from the hands of the family into the hands of the capitalist class, women were left with only the responsibility for the domestic sphere, women and children were drafted as cheap labor and kept in unskilled positions, women became financially dependent on men, and the family unit became peripheral to commodity production. Review of socialization, historical, and political-economics literature indicates that, in addition to these historical influences, several other phenomena have contributed to the position of the family and of women in modern urban societies. Among these phenomena are sprawling urban housing patterns (which encourage individualized and spatially isolated family units and artificial stimulation of consumption), the perpetuation of this isolated family function in accordance with the long term nature of housing resources, and capitalism's inherent necessity for growth in the form of more consumption units structured along these same lines. Additional research is suggested on the role of women in the family under capitalism in the contemporary urban environment. (DB)

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THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY AND WOMEN UNDER CONTEMPORARY URBANISM

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The question we shall examine in this paper is the way in which some aspects of the contemporary urban environment influence the form and function of the family and the position of women within it. As the family is one of the major determinants of the role of women it will be taken as the unit of analysis. For the purposes of this paper, the family will be defined as the patriarchal nuclear family; that is, a male head primarily responsible for economic maintenance, with dependent wife and children. Therefore the following questions will be asked. Firstly, what function does the family have under advanced industrial capitalism, specifically in an urban environment? Secondly, what are some of the spatial manifestations of this function and how do they contribute to perpetuating the family in its present form? The basic relations with which we are concerned apply to the majority of women regardless of class position. In cases where fundamental class differences do occur we shall so indicate.

Before the capitalist mode of production became dominant, women were central to the family. The pre-capitalist family was the elementary unit of production; production and consumption were thus spatially unified in the home. With the advent of industrial capitalism, the position of the family changed fundamentally; the single most important factor was the spatial and functional separation between domestic and industrial activities, the latter being taken over by capitalism outside the home; that is, in a different spatial location. This was due to the fact that the ownership of the means of making a livelihood changed from its traditional position in the hands of the family into the hands of the capitalist class. Women were left only with the structural responsibility for the domestic sphere (and the reasons for this sexual division of labour historically are by no means clear).

Thus this spatial separation, occurring as capitalist social relations

became dominant, represented a sexual as well as an economic division of labour; men became responsible for social production in the industrial sphere in return for a wage and women were confined to the private reproduction and maintenance of labour power and financially dependent on the man. Thus women's domestic labour was devalued as it produced no obvious value or income.¹ The family unit became peripheral to commodity production for exchange (apart from the 'devalued' private production of labour power) both spatially and functionally. Rowbotham indicates this complex process and its fundamental differences according to class which are largely applicable today, as follows:

"Capitalism broke down the old forms of social relations both at home and work and between men and women in society. The consequences were, however, different for the working class than for the middle class. Middle class women found themselves cut off from production and economically dependent on a man; working class women were forced into the factory and became wage labourers". (1973, Rowbotham, p. 55).

The first question we must answer is, what are the peculiar functions of the family under contemporary capitalism and of women within it? To repeat, where in precapitalist society the family was the major unit of production, under contemporary capitalism its function is primarily the reproduction and maintenance of labour power. An essential aspect of this reproductive process is the private nature of consumption by the individual family unit. This form of consumption finds its fullest expression in the contemporary urban environment.

In its peripheral position with regards to industrial or social production, the family is structured by the economy in two major ways. Firstly, by the demands of the economy for specific kinds of labour, and secondly through the objects that are made available for consumption.

In the first case family form and function changes in response to the changes in the type of labour required by the economy. Early industrial capitalism required a large, cheap unskilled labour force. The conditions of its reproduction were of little concern to capital. Therefore women (and children)

were integrated into the labour force with consequent stresses on the family form as it then existed. As the economy increased in technical complexity, it required a more highly skilled, stable and healthy labour force. The conditions of its reproduction, education, maintenance and socialisation became more important. The ideology of capitalism also requires that labour power be individualistic and competitive (in addition to the education demands) and this is best produced in an individualistic family. Thus the individual family was the ideal unit for the total reproductive function and the central burden fell on the women.

"It is the family, and above all the mother, that produces willing participants for the social order", and sees to "the formation of character suitable to the requirements of life within the capitalist world". (Seccombe, N.D., p. 4).

This involved a greater expenditure of time and energy on her part, thus limiting her participation in the labour force on equal terms with men.

In the second case above (the objects made available for consumption), the reproduction of this higher quality labour force required new consumption patterns. These were also related to and structured by the inherent necessity of capital for constant growth and expansion. This necessity for consumption has also helped structure the family into a smaller and more individualistic unit where it is the prime unit for the creation of effective demand. Thus allied to this inherent necessity for expansion, one of capital's main concerns now is with the extension of existing needs and the creation of new ones. The production of needs are the needs of production. The more the family and individuals within it are isolated, the more that needs will be generated. O'Neill summarises this process as follows:

"The whole of society is organised to satisfy domestic passions. And this is an arrangement eminently suited to the ethic of individualistic familism and the socialisation of the members of society into their 'calling' as consumer". (1970, O'Neill, p. 79).

This liberal ideology of possessive individualism is manifest in the way people are seen as self-contained and responsible for their own values, and it is clear that they will need "space and opportunities to realise [their] aims and gratify [their] wishes". (Arblaster, in Miliband & Savile, 1972, p. 91). Thus one of the ways ideology is manifest is in the necessity for each individual nuclear family to be spatially isolated in the ownership of their own homes, thus maximising the production of housing of certain kinds for the capitalist. At the same time this ensures that a whole range of other needs are in turn generated in a kind of multiplier effect. Within the family, the notion of individualism and private space finds its expression, for example, in room separation where each child has her/his own space and, increasingly, her/his own bathroom, car and stereo equipment etc. This consumerism is, of course, more fully developed and evident in middle class than working class families. Consumer capital is directed at each individual and at each age group within the family, and especially at women as they are the prime purchasers of the smaller consumer goods within the family. Witness much of today's blatantly sexist advertising.

The maintenance and reproduction of labour power is thus that process where, by individual consumption, the labourer turns his wage into means of subsistence (for himself and his family) in order to generate more labour power, to earn more money *ad infinitum*. This individual consumption is largely women's labour within the home and it involves a great deal of interaction with capitalist commodity production. Consumption is the corollary of production and vice versa, and here we have the two major functions of the family.

The rest of this paper will be devoted to an examination of the influence of the urban housing market in strengthening and maintaining this peculiar individualised and spatially isolated family unit.

The same economic and social forces which have made the family into a locus of consumption have also structured the city as a consumptive artifact. Harvey

has traced the history of this transformation as follows:

"The American city is now designed to stimulate consumption, the emphasis upon sprawl, individualised modes of consumption, owner occupancy and the like is to be interpreted as one of several responses to the under-consumption problems of the 1930s. The financial superstructure, itself created in response to the crisis conditions of the 1930s so mediated the flow of investment into urban infrastructure, including housing, that is mediation served to transform cities once fashioned as the workshops of industrial society into cities for the artificial stimulation of consumption". (1974, Harvey, p. 21).

This function of the city is especially directed at the family unit in its consumption patterns and the social norm of individual family home ownership is the prime manifestation of this. Since the 1930s, investment has increasingly been channelled into the building of individual, suburban owner-occupied housing and government fiscal policies have reinforced this in, for example, their mortgaging policies and home ownership grants. This mode of consumption of housing requires complimentary investment firstly in individual household equipment where each family has their own washing machine, dryer, fridge, etc., and secondly in social investment, e.g. schools, roads, community centres, etc.

The very spatial design of this consumption oriented city acts to maintain the role of the family, its isolation and competitiveness, and especially that of the woman in her reproductive function as described earlier in this paper. However, "the shaping of the city as a consumption artifact has seriously affected the efficiency of cities as organisations of space for purposes of production and circulation". (1974, Harvey, p. 43).

This inefficiency is of course particularly manifest in transportation problems and Harvey goes on to point out that production is inhibited by the spatial separation of "employment opportunities from the potential labour force" (*op cit.*, p. 43). We would add that production by women is also inhibited by her commitment to maintaining and reproducing the family. Provision of daycare is still an inadequate solution.² These two combine to make the full and equal entry of

women into production extremely difficult. However, we must not overestimate these difficulties of women's participation in the labour force as currently (1974) women comprise 38.5% of the U.S. labour force and of these 59.0% are married. In fact, the large increase of women in the labour force over the last 30 years (21.9% in 1930) is largely due to the increasing numbers of married women in the labour force. (Secombe, N.D., pp. 40-51). There are important class differences in the United States; women with working class husbands are more likely to be in the labour force than are women from the middle classes and, far from their wage being marginal to total family income, it has become increasingly vital for the purchase of necessities, particularly of course for working class families with children. For middle class families necessities may be defined somewhat differently (to include suburban home ownership and two cars). More research needs to be done in this area.

Where married women do work outside the home, many writers have argued that the women in effect have two jobs as they continue to work in the home. However, there is some evidence that sexism in working class families where the wife works may be breaking down. Traditional sex roles in the division of labour within the home may be breaking down as the woman achieves some measure of economic independence. (Blood & Wolfe, 1960). Sexism is, though, clearly evident in the workplace; to the extent that women are paid lower wages than men, their participation in the work force is welcomed by capital and Equal Pay legislation is unlikely to affect those occupations where the vast majority of workers are women. In addition, their labour is welcome to capital to the extent that it augments total consumption in the family. As O'Neill says,

"Despite the heralds of the age of high mass consumption, the fact is that monopoly capitalism is a ... system continually faced with the problem of deficient consumption, structurally related to the class distribution of income. Because of this conventional restraint upon the economic space of the capitalist system, it is necessary to invade the psychic space of workers and consumers through raising levels of expectation, or through deepening levels of credit." (1970, O'Neill, p. 84).

As we have mentioned, one example is in the sphere of housing where its long life span means that it is usually financed by long term loans and obligations. Because of the necessity for maintaining the value of the house for which this debt has been incurred, it is also necessary to maintain a similar structure of family and consumption patterns. The high initial cost of housing means that there is a heavy reliance on financial institutions. The result is that, to quote Harvey, "residential debt has become the largest single component underpinning the viability and security of the financial superstructure". (1974, Harvey, p. 18).

In addition, the government at all levels has incurred long term debts in providing complementary services for housing. One example can be seen in the attempt to improve transportation systems. Thus it is apparently in the interests of all three parties--the family, financial institutions and government--to perpetuate this family form and its level and type of consumption. Long term debt incurred in purchasing housing also tends to stabilise the labour force both geographically and politically.

The maintenance of this debt is predicated upon future economic expansion and growth. This necessity imposes a new constraint on family form. Not only must the value of housing be maintained, but the market must also expand. This encourages the formation of new households with similar consumption patterns. Although the form of family may change superficially (e.g. single parent families), the demand for expanding consumption will impose constraints on any new form of family.

We have isolated three aspects of the contemporary urban environment which we feel influence the position of the family and of women within it. Firstly, by the city's design as a locus of consumption, it helps create and reinforce the family's reproductive functions. Secondly, the long term nature of housing

resources necessitates a perpetuation of this function. Thirdly, capitalism's inherent necessity for growth necessitates the formation of more consumption units structured along the same lines.

The centrality of women in the family appears under capitalism to be essential in maintaining this form of the family. We therefore conclude that any analysis directed at the emancipation of women must include an understanding of the influence of the contemporary urban environment.

FOOTNOTES.

1. However, women do produce the commodity 'labour power' in which is embodied the value of the women's past labour. There is at present much debate as to whether or not women's domestic labour is a productive or unproductive activity. We take the position that women's labour is unproductive, but socially necessary in the strictly Marxist sense, in that women are not paid directly by capital and therefore surplus value is not extracted from their labour.
2. Conversely, day care can be used as a political tool to restrict women's activities in the work force. For example, in a recent strike in Britain, management of Salford Electrical Instruments near Manchester persuaded the local authorities to shut the nurseries to children of women on strike, since they now had the time to look after them themselves, making it difficult for the women to picket. (1975, Cliss, p. 144).

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